On Diversity and the Church

By

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AI Summary:

This document is a sermon delivered by The Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael W. Holland, Founding Bishop of Saint Clare's Anglican Chapel, addressing issues of diversity, unity, and inclusion within the Christian Church, particularly focusing on marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals. It reflects on historical divisions in Christianity and calls for embracing unconditional love and radical hospitality as central Christian values.

Historical Context and Challenges within the Church

The sermon begins by acknowledging the painful divisions within the Anglican Communion, citing a 2010 letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury that highlights ongoing conflicts over human sexuality and the difficulty in achieving reconciliation due to differing consciences and convictions among provinces . The Archbishop proposes limited participation of provinces that breach agreed moratoria in ecumenical dialogues to preserve the Communion's credibility, while emphasizing the need for continued prayer and care for one another despite these divisions .

Similarly, a pastoral letter from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in 2010 is referenced, which recognizes the Spirit's movement toward affirming LGBTQ+ persons as part of God's creation and capable of leadership within the Church. This letter acknowledges the tension between traditional views and more inclusive understandings, affirming that the Episcopal Church is broad enough to hold this variety and that the Spirit guides the Church toward truth over time .

The sermon critiques past missionary approaches that enforced uniformity, causing spiritual violence by suppressing cultural practices and diversity, and urges the Church to avoid repeating such mistakes .

Theological Reflection on Definition and Inclusion

Drawing from philosophical teachings, particularly Plato's Socratic dialogues, the sermon discusses the importance of understanding essential versus accidental qualities in definitions. It uses the example of circumcision in early Christianity, explaining that it was not an essential quality for being Christian, thus illustrating how rigid definitions can cause unnecessary exclusion .

The core essential quality of being Christian, according to the sermon, is to love unconditionally as Christ loves, which is described as a "no brainer" by the founding bishop of the Anglican Church International (ACI). This unconditional love forms the heart of the Gospel and must guide all other beliefs, fostering openness and reconciliation within the Church .

Living the Inclusive Story of Faith

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living and sharing the story of salvation through Christ's Spirit of unconditional love. It calls on the community to actively seek out and support those marginalized or excluded by other denominations, institutions, or society, including the poor, social outcasts, LGBTQ+ persons, racial minorities, and others .

The mission statement of the ACI is highlighted, describing it as a radically inclusive denomination that affirms life-giving theology and seeks to be a safe harbor offering God's grace and Christ's love to all who would receive it .

Key actions for living this story include:

- *Creating a welcoming community that offers grace and love.*
- *Actively reaching out to those left behind or discriminated against.*

- *Embracing diversity in race, creed, sexual orientation, gender identity, and social status.*
- *Following St. Paul's teaching that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female," affirming unity in diversity .*

Prayer and Call to Action

The sermon concludes with a prayer asking for God's guidance to inspire right thinking and merciful action, encouraging the congregation to live out the story of unconditional love and inclusion daily. It urges believers to answer God's call by embodying these principles in their lives, thus contributing to the unity and reconciliation of the Church as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic body of Christ .

Blessings and peace are extended to all at the end of the sermon .

This summary reflects the content and themes of the sermon as presented in the document, emphasizing the call for diversity, inclusion, and unconditional love within the Church and society.

On Diversity and the Church

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church at the time noted: "In their search for uniformity, our forebears in the faith have repeatedly done much spiritual violence in the name of Christianity."

Let us not continue to do the same!!!

In light of recent events and some of our newly elected Prersident's executiver orders I have a felt need to post again this sermon which addresses issues of diversity, unity, and separation that I believe still impacts our lives today – especially those of us who live in countries whose governments have passed laws making homosexuality punishable by death and, closer to home, in the USA, a country in which many of our brothers and sisters now live in fear including LGBTQ+ persons, immigrants, etc. and in those states who have passed laws such as the "Don't Say Gay" law in Florida for example. Notably St. Clare's is in such a state!

Here is the sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, *Trinity I,* 06/22/2025: Year C, Proper 7 *For the RCL readings go here*
https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Season%20after%20Pentecost

About this time of year in 2010 I encountered in my life the issue(s) which threaten to tear the church apart several times in different contexts. I have discussed these issues with a fellow member of the clergy from another Anglican denomination (more conservative/traditional 1928 prayer book) who originally brought to my attention the letter by the Archbishop of Canterbury entitled "Renewal in the Spirit." These encounters led me to looking up on the WWW relevant

documents which have come to pass and, ultimately, have been the source of these discussions. Here are some excerpts from them.

First, from the Archbishop of Canterbury's letter on Pentecost in 2010 in which he states:

"Our Anglican fellowship continues to experience painful division, and the events of recent months have not brought us nearer to full reconciliation. There are still things being done that the representative bodies of the Communion have repeatedly pleaded should not be done; and this leads to recrimination, confusion and bitterness all round. It is clear that the official bodies of The Episcopal Church have felt in conscience that they cannot go along with what has been asked of them by others, and the consecration of Canon Mary Glasspool on May 15 has been a clear sign of this. And despite attempts to clarify the situation, activity across provincial boundaries still continues – equally dictated by what people have felt they must in conscience do. … .

We are at a point in our common life where broken communications and fragile relationships have created a very mistrustful climate. This is not news. But many have a sense that the current risks are greater than ever. Although attitudes to human sexuality have been the presenting cause, I want to underline the fact that what has precipitated the current problem is not simply this issue but the widespread bewilderment and often hurt in different quarters that we have no way of making decisions together so that we are not compromised or undermined by what others are doing. We have not, in other words, found a way of shaping our consciences and convictions as a worldwide body. We have not fully received the Pentecostal gift of mutual understanding for common mission.
… .
And when a province through its formal decision-making bodies or its House of Bishops as a body declines to accept requests or advice from the consultative organs of the Communion, it is very hard (as noted in my letter to the Communion last year after the General Convention of TEC) to see how members of that province can be placed in positions where they are required to represent the Communion as a whole. …

I am therefore proposing that, while these tensions remain unresolved, members of such provinces – provinces that have formally, through their Synod or House of Bishops, adopted policies that breach any of the moratoria requested by the Instruments of Communion and recently reaffirmed by the Standing Committee and the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO) – should not be participants in the ecumenical dialogues in which the Communion is formally engaged. I am further proposing that members of such provinces serving on IASCUFO should for the time being have the status only of consultants rather than full members. This is simply to confirm what the Communion as a whole has come to regard as the acceptable limits of diversity in its practice. … .

In our dealings with other Christian communions, we do not seek to deny our diversity; but there is an obvious problem in putting forward representatives of the Communion who are consciously at odds with what the Communion has formally requested or stipulated. This does not seem fair to them or to our partners. In our dealings with each other, we need to be clear that conscientious decisions may be taken in good faith, even for what are held to be good

theological or missional reasons, and yet have a cost when they move away from what is recognisable and acceptable within the Communion. … .
… .
But if we do conclude that some public marks of 'distance', as the Windsor Continuation Group put it, are unavoidable if our Communion bodies are not to be stripped of credibility and effectiveness, the least Christian thing we can do is to think that this absolves us from prayer and care for each other, or continuing efforts to make sense of each other.

We are praying for a new Pentecost for our Communion. That means above all a vast deepening of our capacity to receive the gift of being adopted sons and daughters of the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It means a deepened capacity to speak of Jesus Christ in the language of our context so that we are heard and the Gospel is made compelling and credible. And it also means a deepened capacity to love and nourish each other within Christ's Body – especially to love and nourish, as well as to challenge, those whom Christ has given us as neighbours with whom we are in deep and painful dispute."

Here are some excerpts from a pastoral letter issued in 2010 by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church:

"Pentecost continues! … .
… .
The Spirit does seem to be saying to many within The Episcopal Church that gay and lesbian persons are God's good creation, that an aspect of good creation is the possibility of lifelong, faithful partnership, and that such persons may indeed be good and healthy exemplars of gifted leadership within the Church, as baptized leaders and ordained ones. The Spirit also seems to be saying the same thing in other parts of the Anglican Communion, and among some of our Christian partners, including Lutheran churches in North America and Europe, the Old Catholic churches of Europe, and a number of others.

That growing awareness does not deny the reality that many Anglicans and not a few Episcopalians still fervently hold traditional views about human sexuality. This Episcopal Church is a broad and inclusive enough tent to hold that variety. The willingness to live in tension is a hallmark of Anglicanism, … . Above all, it recognizes that the Spirit may be speaking to all of us, in ways that do not at present seem to cohere or agree. It also recognizes what Jesus says about the Spirit to his followers, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12-13).

… . Our canons reflected this shift as long ago as 1985, when sexual orientation was first protected from discrimination in access to the ordination process. At the request of other bodies in the Anglican Communion, this Church held an effective moratorium on the election and consecration of a partnered gay or lesbian priest as bishop from 2003 to 2010. When a diocese elected such a person in late 2009, the ensuing consent process indicated that a majority of the laity, clergy, and bishops responsible for validating that election agreed that there was no substantive bar to the consecration.

… .
… . In all humility, we recognize that we may be wrong, yet we have proceeded in the belief that the Spirit permeates our decisions.
We also recognize that the attempts to impose a singular understanding in such matters represent the same kind of cultural excesses practiced by many of our colonial forebears in their missionizing activity. Native Hawaiians were forced to abandon their traditional dress in favor of missionaries' standards of modesty. Native Americans were forced to abandon many of their cultural practices, even though they were fully congruent with orthodox Christianity, because the missionaries did not understand or consider those practices exemplary of the Spirit. … . In their search for uniformity, our forebears in the faith have repeatedly done much spiritual violence in the name of Christianity.
… .
The baptismal covenant prayed in this Church for more than 30 years calls us to respect the dignity of all other persons and charges us with ongoing labor toward a holy society of justice and peace. That fundamental understanding of Christian vocation underlies our hearing of the Spirit in this context and around these issues of human sexuality. That same understanding of Christian vocation encourages us to hold our convictions with sufficient humility that we can affirm the image of God in the person who disagrees with us. We believe that the Body of Christ is only found when such diversity is welcomed with abundant and radical hospitality.

… . … efforts in mission and ministry that inform and transform individuals and communities toward the vision of the Gospel – a healed world, loving God and neighbor, in the love and friendship shown us in God Incarnate."

And, as I have been told by the aforementioned fellow member of the clergy that people need in Homilies information of practical, and sometimes specific practical import, I found that I have a felt need to comment on these issue(s). However, I did not want to do so without first consulting with our Founding Bishop (of the ACI), which I did resulting in his requesting that I email him a copy of this sermon.

I taught Philosophy [what seems like a long time ago (has been several years)] and when I taught Intro courses I always started by having discussions on Plato's early dialogues, the so-called Socratic dialogues. They tended to focus on issues involving definition beginning with a "What is X (piety, justice, etc.)?" question. This, then, would lead to issues involving what constitutes a good definition – one that list all the qualities that make a thing of a certain kind (say a chair) – and how definitions can function – as standards of class inclusion, of what gets in so to speak, and, what is ruled out. [Of course, this would naturally lead to a discussion of the nature of Philosophy and why one might want to spend time that cannot be relived doing it.]
During such discussions I often would ask the class to tell me what a chair is, how they went about knowing in what to sit when they came to class. Interestingly, I rarely got a satisfactory answer to the question! What I was asking for, as was Socrates in Plato's early dialogues, was for them to give me the essential nature or essence of (in this case chairs), chairness so to speak; more specifically, those qualities an object must have to be a chair, or, if you will, those qualities which are such that if an object did not have one of them, then it was not a chair.

Now, if I believed the quality or property of being the color green was an essential quality of chairness, then I would rule out as not chairs all objects that are not green from being in the class of all chairs. Nothing red, I would say, is a chair! And I might add, and only chairs can come in, and I will speak only with chairs, and I will not allow anyone who believes there are such things as red chairs speak for me or the group to which I belong. My doing so, rightly, would seem a bit odd. [Another example would be to say that an essential quality of what it is to be of a particular kind of animal (of a natural kind as opposed to what could be argued is merely a way of classifying things) is for it to be only a particular color, (e.g., white swan). Get the idea!

Of course, there are other sorts of definitions. There are functional definitions, for example, defining what something is by appealing to its function, (e.g., something designed for sitting).

According to the Oxford Bible Commentary:

"There has never been any doubt about the authorship of Galatians: here we meet Paul's pugnacious defense of 'the truth of the gospel' (2:5), as well as his exposition of the significance of God's disclosure of Jesus Christ (1:12). Paul's letter is carefully crafted, though in places the modern reader wishes he had clarified some of his statements. We do not know whether Paul's attempt to fend off the threat of the agitators who had infiltrated the Galatian churches met with immediate success. In the long run, however, Paul was successful: his insistence that Gentiles need not observe the whole Mosiac law (including circumcision) as an integral part of their commitment to Christ won the day, … ". (p.1152).

Circumcision for Paul, then, was not an essential quality of being Christian. To claim that circumcision is an essential quality of being Christian today, even though, and notably, however, it would seem odd to do, would be to mistake an accidental quality of what it is to be Christian for an essential quality. The uncircumcised are in! THANK GOD ALMIGHTY!!!
Yet this issue of accidental vs. essential quality, this issue of definition, threatened to divide the church then, and I believe it continues to do so today. Historically, it has divided us, the church, in many ways – Roman Catholic vs. Protestant, as well as the various Protestant denominations - from being the ONE Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church we are called to be by God in and through Christ in the Unity of His Spirit – One BODY of CHRIST in the world. The/a question for us today, then, is whether we will allow ourselves, by means of the Gift of God's Grace, to discern and bear the Truth which is Christ by faith?! Will we allow ourselves to proclaim the Truth of God unconditional love for all His creation, and therefore His unconditional inclusion in His Kingdom of all who turn to Him?!

In the past on one occasion I told our founding Bishop this and went on to say what I thought is an essential quality of being Christian, namely, to unconditionally love one another as we are unconditionally loved by God in and through Christ in the Unity of his Holy Spirit – the Gift of His Grace of unconditional love given us by God through Christ which we celebrated receiving at Pentecost. His reply was that this is a "no brainer."

That it is a "no brainer" tells us something of its place in the web of our beliefs – it is at the core. It follows, then, that all other beliefs in our web can be maintained only to the extent to which they cohere with it. This is the heart of the Gospel, Christ's new commandment to love one

another as He loves us. And it makes possible the openness necessary to complete Christ's reconciling work in the world. For it allows for our being able to proclaim the Good News of Salvation to all people and all God's Creation. It allows, no calls, us to reach out to all people regardless of race, creed, sexual orientation, social status, transgendered persons, etc., as opposed to ruling them out as not belonging, banishing them, and in so doing walking ourselves right outside the gates of His Kingdom.

Recently in a sermon I talked about stories. Another way to put this is to say that it calls us to tell our story, our story of finding salvation in Christ's Spirit of unconditional love working through us, unconditional love, our story of experiencing His Spirit of unconditional love and unconditional inclusion that it entails in our relationships with one another, lifting us all up in Christ, by our so living it. We live our story by striving to make our relations with others what Christ's relation with us, His Church, is in all we do at all times. And, Christ's relation with us is defined by what He did for us out of His unconditional love for us. Notably, He indiscriminately reached out in love to all of us. And this indiscriminately reaching out is at the heart of our mission statement here at St. Clare's:

"The ACI is a radically inclusive denomination. Our creator calls every person to turn to God's embrace; to find safety, love, and support and freedom to respond to the call of a loving God. We affirm a theology that is life giving and enhancing, rather than one that is shaming, stifling, or repressive. The ACI seeks, with God's help, to be a safe harbor, a community of light that offers God's grace and Christ's love to all who would receive it. We actively seek out those who are on the sides of the road; left behind or out by other denominations, institutions, or systems; those who have been discriminated against, or have not felt truly at home in other denominations. Some of these are the poor, social outcasts, gay men and lesbians, racial minorities, the young and old, people with broken relationships, women, trans-gendered persons, those abused or neglected in any way, those dealing with mental or physical challenges and all those seeking to love God and their neighbor as themselves."

- We live out our story in our daily lives, then, when we seek out and are a safe harbor, a community of light that offers God's grace and Christ's love to all who would receive it.

- We live out our story when we actively seek out those who are on the sides of the road; left behind or out by other denominations, institutions, or systems; those who have been discriminated against, or have not felt truly at home in other denominations.

- When we seek out those abused or neglected in any way, those dealing with mental or physical challenges,

- We live out our story when we, in our daily lives seek out the poor, social outcasts, gay men and lesbians,

- When we seek out racial minorities, the young and old, people with broken relationships, women, trans-gendered persons,

- When we put on the mind of Christ and thereby know as St. Paul tells us in our Epistle reading for today, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” and, therefore, seek out these and all of God’s Creation; and, unconditionally love them as we (and they) are unconditionally loved by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When we live our story, we tell it to all we encounter so those with ears might hear/with eyes might see – that our story might become theirs, that they might find life in and through Christ in the Unity of His Holy Spirit of unconditional love! And as our story becomes theirs, that which has been covered is uncovered and what has drawn near becomes visible as it becomes on Earth as it is in Heaven in our answering Christ call to bring the Kingdom of God to all we encounter. In so living our story, we, in and through Christ are reconciled and united with God in heart and mind as we live out our story in the Unity of His Holy Spirit - the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of God.

Let us then do that to which we are called by God in Christ. Let us answer His call by living our story today, right now! And let us, then, pray that we might so live our story today and all the days of our lives:

O God, from whom all good proceeds, you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving¬kindness: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, (i.e., know that we are reach out to all people in Your Spirit of unconditional love and inclusion regardless of race, creed, sexual orientation, social status, gender orientation etc., as opposed to ruling them out as not belonging, banishing them – know our story), and by your merciful guiding may do them, (i.e., live our story); through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Blessings and Peace to All!!!
+MWH

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Summary:
The sermon reflects on the historical and ongoing struggles within Christianity regarding diversity, unity, and inclusion, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ individuals and marginalized communities. The Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael W. Holland emphasizes the need for the church to avoid repeating past spiritual violence committed in the name of uniformity. He references the 2010 statements from the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and the Archbishop of Canterbury, highlighting the painful divisions within the Anglican Communion and the importance of recognizing and respecting diversity in beliefs and practices.
Holland argues that the church must embrace unconditional love and inclusion, as exemplified by Christ, and that this love should extend to all individuals, regardless of their background or identity. He calls for a commitment to living out this inclusive vision in daily life, actively seeking out and supporting those who have been marginalized or excluded. The sermon concludes with a prayer for guidance in embodying these principles, urging the congregation to live their story of faith and love in a way that reflects God's grace and acceptance for all.

AI Copilot Summary

This document presents a sermon focused on diversity, inclusion, and the challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals. It emphasizes the importance of unconditional love and acceptance within the church, urging members to embrace all people regardless of their background or identity.

- **Historical context of division:** The sermon reflects on the historical divisions within Christianity and the spiritual violence done in the name of uniformity, stressing the need for unity in diversity.
- **Current societal issues:** It addresses contemporary issues such as laws against homosexuality and the fear experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals and immigrants, particularly in the U.S.
- **Call for inclusivity:** The sermon advocates for recognizing and affirming LGBTQ+ individuals as part of God's creation, highlighting the need for a church that welcomes and includes everyone.
- **Role of the Holy Spirit:** It emphasizes the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church towards a deeper understanding of love and acceptance, urging members to listen to the Spirit's call.
- **Importance of storytelling:** The document encourages sharing personal stories of faith and salvation as a means to foster connection and understanding among diverse individuals.

Commitment to action: Finally, it calls for active engagement in living out the church's mission to love and support all people, reflecting Christ's unconditional love in daily life.